

# CongressDailyAM

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AM COLUMN

## LOOKING IN

### Majority Rules

Partisan juices were stirring on Capitol Hill in October 1987. Republicans decried Senate rejection of President Reagan's nomination of Robert H. Bork to the Supreme Court. House and Senate Democratic majorities were doggedly investigating the Reagan administration's alleged abuses in the "Iran-contra" affair. And in his first year as House speaker, **Jim Wright** was unabashedly pursuing his domestic and foreign policy agenda.

In that context, National Journal reporter James A. Barnes scheduled an interview with the House Republican Conference chairman to discuss the prospective presidential campaign. But then-Rep. **Dick Cheney** had other things he wanted to get off his mind. Peeved with the tactics Wright had used the previous day -- adjourning the House momentarily so the Rules Committee could report a new rule on a bill and convincing Rep. **Jim Chapman**, D-Texas, to switch his vote on a budget reconciliation bill and permit it to pass by one vote after the 15-minute time had expired -- Cheney unloaded on Wright: "He's a heavy-handed son of a bitch and he doesn't know any other way to operate, and he will do anything he can to win at any price.-- There is no sense of comity left."

Publication of the normally circumspect Cheney's harsh comments first signaled the unraveling of Wright's power as speaker, some on Capitol Hill later contended; after 19 months, including an ethics contretemps, Wright resigned. But it took seven years for House Republicans to convince voters to oust the majority party for having abused and misused its power.

Following their nine painful years in the House minority, some Democrats contend last Saturday's pre-dawn, three-hour vote to pass the Medicare conference report could represent a comparable turning point for the House. "This was a watershed event," said Rep. **Diana DeGette**, D-Colo., a key deputy of **Minority Whip Hoyer**. "Now that the press and American public have seen how ham-handed the Republicans are, the worse it will get for them." DeGette emphasized House Democrats' objections were on the substance of the Medicare bill, and she said the unprecedented three hours that GOP leaders had required to secure a majority underlined "what a bad bill it is."

"This will come back to haunt them because of how heavy-handed they are," said Rules ranking member **Martin Frost** of Texas. "It showed their desperation and their need to win at all costs, especially when major conservatives were speaking out against the bill." Forcing members to vote contrary to their own philosophical views was something Wright did not condone, said Frost, a protege of the former speaker.

Ebullient Republicans dismiss the Democrats' complaints and contend their own actions responded to the aggressive partisan tactics across the aisle. "It was obvious to us that several Democratic members wanted to change their votes and that Democratic leaders were intimidating their members," said John Feehery, spokesman for **Speaker Hastert**. The three hours required to secure a majority "shows how hard it is to pass bills," he said, and how difficult it is to "steer a middle course in the House." Far from being heavy-handed, Feehery said, Hastert "was trying to find the right combination to unlock the will of the House and to counter the heavy-handed tactics of Democrats."

The GOP counterpoints have been buttressed by the prominent Senate Democrats who have sponsored the Medicare deal, plus the notable splits among Democrats on the Senate floor this week. But they do not

fully respond to House Democrats' deep-seated anger over how the GOP has run that chamber.

Claims of a "tyranny of the majority" have been common in the history of the House and have taken many forms. Nearly a century apart, Speakers **Joseph Cannon** and **Newt Gingrich** were ousted because of revolts within their own party. The usually strict majority-rule tradition of the House makes it more difficult for the minority party to force parliamentary changes.

For now, that forces Democrats to take to the public their case of procedural abuse. Even before the latest incident, they were citing the "three Rs"-the recount of the 2000 Florida presidential vote, this year's "re-redistricting" in Texas and the recall of Democratic Gov. Gray Davis in California -- as evidence Republicans were abusing the rights of voters and would stop at nothing to achieve their goals.

Although none of those cases has provided a cut-and-dried example of anti-democratic behavior by Republicans, Democrats contend the GOP leaders' lust for power eventually will backfire with voters. Inevitably, the pendulum will swing back, but that will require making a more concerted case against Republican policies and tactics. The stunning and highly public display of power by Hastert and his lieutenants last weekend may serve, at least, as a warning that even the current House majority must respect some limits. *By Richard E. Cohen*

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